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General and Special Education Teachers' Preparation Needs in Providing Social Support: A Needs Assessment

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Abstract: *This exploratory study inquires into the types of preservice and inservice preparation practicing elementary school general and special educators have received to facilitate the social functioning of students with and without disabilities. Sixty teachers serving students with learning disabilities who were educated in inclusive environments for at least 80% of the school day were interviewed. Eleven general educators and 19 special educators could not recall receiving any preservice preparation on providing social support to their students. Twenty-four general educators and 23 special educators reported participating in a range of inservice opportunities. Twenty-seven general educators and 24 special educators indicated a need for additional training, identifying areas like dealing with challenging behaviors, teaching social skills, teasing and tattling. Implications for teacher preparation programs are discussed.*

All individuals, and particularly those with disabilities, need support from members of their social networks both at school and at home. Empirical evidence suggests that many students with mild disabilities demonstrate difficulties in the area of social skills and relationships, and experience lower levels of acceptance from peers and teachers (Bryan, 1997; Gresham, 1997; Kavale & Forness, 1996). In a meta-analysis of 152 studies investigating the social skills deficits of students with learning disabilities, Kavale and Forness (1996) found that about 75% of students identified as having learning disabilities exhibited social skills deficits. Furthermore, their teachers rated students with learning disabilities as engaging in less social interactions than their non-disabled peers, and having adjustment problems due to higher levels of hyperactivity, distractibility, and anxiety as compared to peers without disabilities (Kavale & Forness, 1996).

Difficulties developing social relation-

ships have been found to impact affective development as well, resulting in loneliness (Margalit & Efrati, 1994; Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2000), depression, and suicide ideation (Peck, 1985). These social and affective problems, in turn, impact the life adjustment of students, and result in a higher likelihood of dropping out of school, and even engaging in aggressive and criminal behavior (Bryan, 1997; Parker & Asher, 1987; Seidel & Vaughn, 1991). Social skills deficits have also been found to result in negative post-school outcomes such as obtaining and keeping a job (N. Elksnin & L. Elksnin, 2001).

Given this evidence regarding the social skills deficits in students with learning disabilities, it would be myopic to merely focus on developing their academic competence without adequately preparing school personnel to attend to their social, emotional, and behavioral development. These students need social support from their school community. Receiving adequate social support

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from members of one's social community has been found to enhance an individual's self-esteem and sense of well-being (Kloomok & Cosden, 1994; Rothman & Cosden, 1995). Berndt (1989) discussed four types of social support that is provided by important players in a student's environment: (a) esteem, which allows a student to feel respected and valued; (b) informational support in the form of advice or guidance; (c) instrumental support which includes assistance in problem solving; and (d) companionship that allows the student to experience a sense of belonging and acceptance.

General and special education teachers have reported that they play an important role in promoting the social functioning of their students with and without disabilities (Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2001; Smith & Smith, 2000). While teachers recognize and acknowledge their participation in facilitating the social development of their students, many have expressed a need for additional training in facilitating the social inclusion of students (Baum, Duffelmeyer, & Geelan, 1988; Bradley & West, 1994; Hamre-Nietupski, Hendrickson, Nietupski, & Sasso, 1993; Smith & Smith, 2000). For instance, Baum and colleagues (1988) found that of the 299 resource teachers surveyed, only 25% felt they had received formal preparation to teach social skills to the students with learning disabilities that they served. Approximately 56% of resource teachers believed they had received fair to poor preparation in this area, while 18% of these teachers reported that they had no preparation to teach social skills to students with learning disabilities.

Furthermore, despite teachers' apparent willingness to support students, students themselves do not seem to consider teachers to be an important source of social support (Clark-Lempers, Lempers, & Ho, 1991; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985; Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2000, 2001). The students with and without mild disabilities in these studies were less likely to nominate teachers as a source of social support than their parents, siblings, and friends.

Teachers as leaders in the classroom environment, play an important role in fostering a sense of classroom community and be-

longing (Margalit, 1994). Given the pivotal position that teachers are in to offer students with and without disabilities both emotional support and instrumental assistance, there is value in investigating the reasons why teachers are not viewed as a primary source of social support. A possible explanation for this finding is that while teachers believe it is within their role to provide social support to students, they are adopting strategies that are not effective toward meeting this objective. This is further illustrated in the study by Gelzheiser, McLane, Meyers, and Pruzek (1998), who found that while student IEPs adequately reflected students' present functioning levels in the social domain, students with documented needs in this domain did not receive adequate instruction for them to meet established IEP goals.

As previously indicated, many teachers report that they are not able to adequately address the social instruction needs of their students (Bradley & West, 1994; Smith & Smith, 2000). In turn, social outcomes for students may be compromised (Gelzheiser et al., 1998). Teachers must have access to information and to develop skills required to meet students' social needs. This preparation is provided through preservice and inservice programs.

To explore the extent to which teachers felt prepared to enhance social functioning in their students, interviews were conducted with 60 general and special education teachers. The interviews focused on teachers' preservice and inservice preparation, as well as current training needs, with regard to providing social support to the students they work with in inclusive classrooms. The study targeted three questions that teachers were asked to respond to:

1. Were you given any training about children's social relationships or social skills during your teacher preparation program? If yes, please describe.
2. Have you received any inservice training on the topic? If yes, please describe.
3. Do you feel the need for additional information on how to foster social relationships between students in your classroom or in providing social support to

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Table 1. Special and General Educator Demographics

Demographic Variable	Special Educators <i>n</i> = 30	General Educators <i>n</i> = 30
Gender		
Female	30	25
Male	0	5
Ethnicity		
European-American	30	28
African-American	0	1
Hispanic	0	1
Highest educational degree		
Bachelors	14	18
Masters	14	9
Advanced certificate	2	3
Age range	24–58 (<i>M</i> = 43)	22–59 (<i>M</i> = 41)
Total years of teaching experience	3–36 (<i>M</i> = 15)	1–31 (<i>M</i> = 13)
1–5 yrs	6	11
6–10 yrs	4	3
11–15 yrs	7	2
16–20 yrs	6	5
21–25 yrs	4	6
25 yrs +	3	3
Years at grade level	1–36 (<i>M</i> = 11)	1–22 (<i>M</i> = 8)
Years in inclusive classrooms	0–18 (<i>M</i> = 5)	1–22 (<i>M</i> = 7)

your students? If yes, what kinds of information would be beneficial?

Methodology

Participants

The data for this study were collected as part of a larger study where students with learning disabilities who were educated in general education classes for at least 80% of the school day and their general and special education teachers were interviewed regarding social support at school (see Pavri and Monda-Amaya, 2001). Thirty general education teachers and 30 special education teachers working with students with learning disabilities in grades three to five were included in the sample.

Participating teachers met the following criteria: a) certified general educators at the third, fourth, or fifth grade levels who had students with learning disabilities in their classrooms, or b) certified special education teachers who worked with third to fifth grade students with learning disabilities who were educated in the general education classroom for at least 80% of the school day. The special education teachers either provided ser-

vices in pull-out resource room settings, served as co-teachers in general education classrooms, or provided direct and indirect consultation services to general educators who taught students with learning disabilities.

The general education teachers represented 11 schools across 7 urban and suburban school districts in a mid-western state. The special education teachers interviewed were from 21 different schools across 8 urban and suburban school districts across the same state. Special educators came from a larger number of schools as compared to general educators, as a majority of the participating elementary schools had only one special education teacher on staff that met the study criteria. All participating teachers served students with learning disabilities who were educated in the general education setting for at least 80% of the school day. In addition, several teachers also served students with other disability labels. No a priori considerations were made regarding age, gender, cultural or language background, and years of teaching experience in the sample of teachers. See Table 1 for demographic infor-

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mation on participating general and special educators.

Instrument

Social Support Interview

General and special education teachers participated in a Social Support Interview developed for this study. The interview had three sections. The first included demographic information regarding the teachers' age, educational background and training, years of teaching experience, and years of experience working in inclusive classrooms. The second included open-ended questions inquiring into teachers' perceptions about providing social support and promoting peer relationships among students in inclusive classrooms, their perceived role in this process, and a description of the strategies they use to provide social support and foster relationships between their students. The third section, findings of which will be reported in this article, comprised of questions inquiring into the preservice and inservice preparation that teachers had received in the area of providing social support to students with and without disabilities. Teachers were also asked if they felt a need for additional preparation in the area of providing social support and to identify specific areas in which they would like to further develop their knowledge and skills. Probe questions were included on the interview protocol in the event that a particular response required follow up.

The Social Support Interview was developed by the author for the purpose of this study. The semi-structured interview protocol investigated teachers' perceptions about the adequacy of their preservice and inservice preparation and their perceived need for additional training and information regarding facilitating social development in the students they taught. The Social Support Interview protocol was piloted using three teachers who had taught third to fifth grade students in special and general education classrooms. These professionals provided validation of the protocol content, and gave feedback regarding the wording of questions, the ease of answering the questions, and the time taken to complete the interview. Minor changes were made to the protocol based on

their oral feedback, so as to enhance clarity of directions and wording of interview questions.

Procedure

After securing permission from participants, teachers were interviewed individually at their schools. The complete interviews lasted between 20 to 90 minutes, with most interview sessions lasting about 45 to 60 minutes. When teachers were unable to think of a response to a given question, or when their response was restricted to using a particular strategy or activity, the interviewer provided a prompt to allow for a more complete response. Teacher responses to interview questions were tape-recorded. They were thanked for their participation and presented with a small token of appreciation.

Social support was defined by the researcher as the different things that teachers could do to help students develop social relationships with others, and to feel valued and comfortable at school. Both groups of teachers were asked open-ended questions about the strategies used to provide social support to the students with and without disabilities that they worked with. Questions related to teacher preparation needs in providing social support were the focus of this part of the study.

Data Analysis

Content analysis procedures adapted from Johnson and LaMontagne (1993) were used to analyze the open-ended questions on this interview. Themes emerging from the content analysis were compared to identify differences between general and special educators' responses. The author identified emerging themes, and a research associate reviewed the responses to determine whether they fit the tentative categories. Category reliability and interrater agreement was determined by coding 30% of all responses using the point-by-point agreement method (Kazdin, 1982). Responses were independently sorted into the emerging themes by both the author and the research associate with interrater agreement varying from 88% to 100%. Based on the reliability data, some of the

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Table 2. Frequency of General Educator's Responses regarding Preservice Preparation on Social Support

Themes	Years of Teaching Experience						Overall Frequency (%)
	1-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-25	25 +	
None/can't remember	2	1	—	1	5	2	11 (31%)
Broad overview	8	1	—	1	1	—	11 (31%)
More during masters	1	1	—	1	1	1	5 (13%)
Very little	1	1	1	1	—	—	4 (11%)
During student teaching and practicums	1	—	1	1	—	—	3 (9%)
Content covered in preservice	1	—	—	—	—	—	1 (3%)
Total frequency	14	4	2	5	7	3	35 (100%)

Note. Several responses fell into more than one thematic category.

themes were revised and redefined to provide a comprehensive representation of categories.

Results

The first research question inquired into whether teachers were given any training about children's social relationships or social skills during their teacher preparation programs. Many of the participating general educators had completed their preservice programs several years ago (the mean length of teaching experience for general educators was 13 years). Of the 30 general educators interviewed, 11 either felt that they had not received any preservice preparation related to children's social relationships or social skills, or could not remember whether their preservice coursework covered these topics. Two of the teachers in this group had recently completed their preservice training and had been teaching for less than five years, two teachers had been teaching between 6 and 20 years, and seven teachers had been teaching for more than 20 years. Four other teachers reported very little discussion of social issues in their preservice training. Only one general educator stated that these issues were well discussed in her preservice training.

Eleven of the general education teachers indicated that that they received a broad overview of special education and social development issues in an introductory special education, human development, or psychology class. Of these 11 teachers, eight were new teachers with less than five years of teaching experience.

Five teachers suggested that additional

preparation was offered in Master's level coursework where students got to discuss intervention strategies in greater depth. Student teaching and the practicum components of coursework, which allowed opportunities to obtain first hand experiences working with students, were identified by three respondents as effective learning opportunities for facilitating social development in students. Table 2 shows the distribution of responses made by general educators disaggregated by their years of teaching experience.

The mean length of teaching experience for special educators was 15 years. Special educators with varying levels of teaching experience gave similar responses regarding their preservice preparation for facilitating social relationships. As compared to general educators, a greater number of special educators felt that they did not receive adequate preservice preparation regarding children's social development, with 19 of the 30 respondents reporting that they either received no preservice training on the topic, or that they could not recall whether they had coursework in the area. Of these 19 teachers, five had recently completed their preservice programs and had been teaching for less than five years. Ten of these special educators had been teaching between 6 and 20 years, and four teachers had more than 20 years of teaching experience.

Like their general education peers, five special educators indicated that a broad overview of social development was offered in courses devoted to topics such as the char-

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Table 3. Frequency of Special Educator's Responses regarding Preservice Preparation on Social Support

Themes	Years of Teaching Experience						Overall Frequency (%)
	1-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-25	25 +	
None/can't remember	5	1	4	5	2	2	19 (54%)
General overview	—	3	1	—	1	—	5 (15%)
Very little	2	—	—	1	—	1	4 (11%)
More during masters	—	—	2	—	1	—	3 (9%)
During student teaching and practicums	—	1	1	—	1	—	3 (9%)
Spontaneous class discussions	—	—	1	—	—	—	1 (2%)
Total frequency	7	5	9	6	5	3	35 (100%)

Note. Several responses fell into more than one thematic category.

acteristics of exceptional learners, behavior management, human development, or introductory psychology. Four special educators reported very little coverage of these topics. One respondent suggested that these topics were addressed in their coursework, largely through spontaneous discussions rather than formal lectures. Three responses each suggested greater coverage of the topics at advanced graduate levels of study, and during student teaching and course practicums. Table 3 shows the distribution of special educators' responses regarding their preservice preparation disaggregated by the years of teaching experience.

The second research question investigated whether teachers had inservice opportunities in the areas of social skills and social relationships. The teachers interviewed discussed several different on-the-job training opportunities. Twenty-four general educators and 23 special educators reported participating in professional development activities in the area of social skills and social development. Conversely, six general educators and seven special educators reported that they had either not been offered or had not sought out professional development on these topics. A large number of respondents (seven general educators and six special educators) reported that their inservices dealt with school-wide prevention programs e.g., Peaceable Schools, Skills for Growing, New Directions, all of which have a strong focus toward social and affective development of students. Other inservice opportunities cited by general educators included attending

workshops on general special education and inclusion issues, and workshops specifically targeting children's social processes such as social skills development, problem solving, decision making, and conflict resolution. They also developed their skills and knowledge through taking advanced University coursework, independent reading, professional experiences, and collaboration with their colleagues. Table 4 depicts general educators responses to this question, disaggregated by their years of teaching experience.

Special educators stated that they most frequently attended inservice workshops dealing with topics related to challenging student behaviors such as aggression and anger control, discipline issues, and working with students with ADHD. They also attended workshops on inclusion and other introductory special education topics. Four special education teachers reported attending professional conferences including the Council for Exceptional Children Convention and the American Speech-Hearing-Language Association conferences, which offer sessions on children's social development and functioning. Two special educators stated that their independent reading and professional experiences led to their knowledge and skill development. One special educator learned through collaboration with other faculty, and another teacher reported going to visit special education programs which allowed her to see how the staff worked to facilitate children's social competence. Table 5 shows special educators' responses to the question on

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Table 4. Frequency of General Educator's Responses regarding Inservice Preparation on Social Support

Themes	Years of Teaching Experience						Overall Frequency (%)
	1-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-25	25 +	
No inservices	3	1	1	1	—	—	6 (15%)
General inservices on special education and inclusion	2	1	1	1	4	1	10 (24%)
Prevention programs	5	1	—	1	—	—	7 (17%)
Inservices to facilitate social behavior	2	—	—	2	1	—	5 (12%)
Workshops on classroom behavior and discipline	1	—	—	1	2	1	5 (12%)
Professional experience and independent reading	2	—	—	—	2	—	4 (10%)
Graduate coursework	—	—	—	—	2	—	2 (5%)
Collaboration with other faculty	—	—	—	—	1	1	2 (5%)
Total frequency	15	3	2	6	12	3	41 (100%)

Note. Several responses fell into more than one thematic category.

inservice programs disaggregated by their years of teaching experience.

The final question investigated teachers' need for additional training regarding providing social support and facilitating children's social skills. Twenty-seven general educators and 24 special educators indicated a need for additional training. Training needs identified were very individualized and varied. Areas identified by both groups of educators as those they would like additional information about included dealing with challenging behaviors such as aggression and at-

tention problems, teaching social skills and pragmatics to assist children in making and keeping friends, dealing with teasing and tattling, working closely with families to assist them in supporting their children, and learning more about early intervention to prevent problem behaviors in children.

Three general educators wanted to learn about facilitating relationships in inclusive environments. Another three general educators wanted to learn how to embed social strategies and social instruction in the academic curriculum so as not to teach social

Table 5. Frequency of Special Educator's Responses regarding Inservice Preparation on Social Support

Themes	Years of Teaching Experience						Overall Frequency (%)
	1-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-25	25 +	
No inservices	2	—	3	1	—	1	7 (17%)
Workshops on classroom behavior and discipline	3	2	1	4	4	1	15 (36%)
Prevention programs and published social skills curriculum	1	2	2	—	—	1	6 (14%)
General workshops on special education	1	1	3	—	—	1	6 (14%)
Professional conferences	—	—	1	1	—	—	4 (9%)
Professional experience and independent reading	—	1	—	1	—	—	2 (5%)
Collaboration with other faculty	—	—	1	—	—	—	1 (2%)
Visit other programs	—	—	—	—	—	1	1 (2%)
Total frequency	7	6	11	7	5	6	42 (100%)

Note. Several responses fell into more than one thematic category.

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Table 6. Frequency of Additional Training Needs Identified by General Educators

Themes	Years of Teaching Experience						Overall Frequency (%)
	1-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-25	25 +	
No additional training needs	1	—	—	1	1	—	3 (8%)
Anything/nothing specific	2	—	—	1	1	—	4 (10%)
Social skills and self concept (e.g., problem solving, making friends)	4	—	1	—	1	2	8 (20%)
Challenging behaviors (e.g., frustration, ADHD)	—	2	—	2	1	—	5 (13%)
Facilitating inclusion (e.g., acceptance, belonging)	2	—	—	—	1	—	3 (7%)
Teasing and tattling	2	—	1	—	—	—	3 (7%)
Social strategies embedded in the academic curriculum	1	1	1	—	—	—	3 (7%)
Working with families	1	—	—	—	2	—	3 (8%)
Early intervention—to prevent problem behaviors	1	—	—	—	1	—	2 (5%)
Miscellaneous	3	—	—	1	—	1	6 (15%)
Total frequency	17	3	3	5	9	3	40 (100%)

Note. Several responses fell into more than one thematic category.

skills in isolation. Four general educators said they were open to new information, though could not state what specific information would be beneficial to them. There were no emerging trends in the additional training needs identified by novice and more experienced teachers. The areas identified by general educators, disaggregated by their years of teaching experience, are listed in Table 6.

Additional training needs identified by special educators closely paralleled those of their general education colleagues. Across the varying levels of teaching experience, special educators expressed greatest need in dealing with challenging behaviors. Special educa-

tors' responses regarding additional training needs are shown in Table 7.

Discussion

General and special education teachers reported that their preservice coursework provided minimal preparation on how to facilitate social skills and social relationships in children. This finding is supported by existing research with both general educators (Smith & Smith, 2000) and special education teachers (Baum et al., 1988). It is ironic that special educators, who are often viewed as education specialists and consultants to

Table 7. Frequency of Additional Training Needs Identified by Special Educators

Themes	Years of Teaching Experience						Overall Frequency (%)
	1-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-25	25 +	
No additional training needs	2	—	2	1	—	1	6 (17%)
Challenging behaviors (e.g., frustration, ADHD)	—	3	3	4	—	—	10 (28%)
Social skills and self concept (e.g., problem solving, making friends)	3	1	—	—	—	1	5 (14%)
Teasing, tattling, bullying	2	1	—	—	1	—	4 (11%)
Working with families	—	1	2	—	—	—	3 (8%)
Early intervention—to prevent problem behaviors	—	—	—	1	1	—	2 (5%)
Miscellaneous	—	—	2	1	2	1	6 (17%)
Total frequency	7	6	9	7	4	3	36 (100%)

Note. Several responses fell into more than one thematic category.

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general classroom teachers on academic and social issues, reported receiving less preservice preparation in this area than did general education teachers. A possible explanation to this finding could be that special educators in their everyday jobs as consultants and direct service providers have to problem solve and deal with issues related to facilitating social development in students to a greater extent than general educators, often times working with students who are more challenging too. When they encounter these challenges, they may find that they were not provided with sufficient information and skills during their preservice coursework.

Interestingly, though, special educators continue to be perceived by general educators as the experts who are better prepared in the social domain. This was reflected in a general educator's comment when she stated, "I almost think all classroom teachers should have special education certification too, because there is so much you can learn from the special education people."

In comments made throughout the interviews, several teachers reported learning more on the job than during preservice education. A general educator stated, "Some of that cannot be addressed as a beginning teacher who is getting to know the nuts and bolts of teaching. It's as you get on to the fifth or sixth year that you begin to understand more about the animal that has been delivered to you . . . and you can go on to the next level which would be analyzing your students' social relationships." Several teachers noted that teacher preparation programs today are doing better with linking theory with practice and getting students out into the field earlier on in their training programs. For instance, a special educator stated, "... most everything I picked up is after [my preservice program]. I know they are getting better about that now because I get student teachers and they are bringing in things to try and I like that they are doing that."

Most of the general and special educators reported that a fair number of inservice and professional development opportunities were made available to them. They did not complain about a lack of inservice days nor about the types of inservices that were offered. Funding seemed to be available for a range

of professional development activities, including attending professional conferences. Special educators, to a greater extent than general educators, reported attending professional conferences. It is possible that findings regarding inservice opportunities might be different in larger, urban school districts with limited financial resources.

Similarly, a vast majority of the general and special educators interviewed felt the need for additional training in how to facilitate children's social relationships. Six special educators did not feel a need for additional training, and two of them offered a rationale for their stand. While one teacher said she was not interested in additional training because she was close to retirement age, the other was a novice teacher who had only been teaching for six weeks. The latter teacher's rationale was, "I think the teachers are really good here . . . I don't see any deficit areas. I think the kids really like this school and I don't see any kids being excluded." From her perspective, additional information would be required if she had to deal with problem behaviors, rather than as a preventive approach.

Another noteworthy finding was that only one teacher, a special educator, indicated a need for more information related to assessment and evaluation of the effectiveness of the interventions that she was using. Since it is important to obtain assessment data on students' social skills and relationships prior to developing individualized and meaningful interventions, it is rather surprising that more teachers did not express a need for information on assessment techniques. This is particularly important in light of the fact that general and special educators did not report participating in inservices on the use of effective assessments to identify and monitor progress in students' social functioning.

It should be noted that while the sample of this study comprised of teachers with varying levels of teaching experience, there were no apparent differences in the training needs identified by novice and veteran teachers. Also, both general and special educators reported a need for additional information on similar topics. It appears that the need areas identified were critical to all teachers working with third to fifth grade students

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with learning disabilities, regardless of their levels of experience and whether they were general or special educators.

Limitations of the Study

Results of this study are restricted by certain limitations. First, the teachers volunteered to participate in the study, hence their responses may not be typical of teachers who would be less willing to discuss social support issues. Second, limitations to using interview as a data collection tool such as error resulting from the interviewer, the interview schedule and coding techniques have been cited in the research literature (Cohen & Manion, 1994; Fontana & Frey, 1994). Furthermore, Lincoln and Guba (1986) identify limitations in the area of trustworthiness when adopting qualitative data analyses. These limitations raise questions about the credibility of teacher-reports, transferability of findings to a larger group of teachers, and the dependability and confirmability of the inquiry. Third, participants were elementary school teachers from a single Mid-Western state, mostly from smaller urban and suburban school districts; their responses may not generalize to teachers working at different grade levels and in rural or large urban schools. Fourth, the teaching practices adopted by the teachers were not observed in this study, with the findings being limited to teacher report. Finally, the mean range of teaching experience for the participants was 13 to 15 years. Although there were no apparent trends in the data, it is possible that due to the length of time that had elapsed several of the respondents were not able to adequately recall the details of their preservice program. It is believed that participants felt free to report their perspectives in a secure environment as a neutral University researcher not affiliated to their school districts interviewed them, and they were ensured of confidentiality and anonymity of the results.

Final Comments

This study reveals that practicing general and special education teachers do not report having received sufficient information about facilitating the social functioning of their students with special needs during their preser-

vice preparation. These teachers participated in many staff development opportunities to further build their knowledge and skills in this domain. Yet, most participants reported that there were several topics about which they would like additional information so as to better serve their students.

It is believed that findings from this study will assist both teacher preparation programs and school districts to better prepare preservice and inservice general and special education teachers with the knowledge base and skills needed to facilitate social functioning and relationships for all students. These findings will allow teacher preparation programs the opportunity to revisit their curriculum and assignments, so as to enhance the education and preparation of beginning and experienced teachers. Furthermore, the needs identified by study participants could serve as guidelines for district-level staff development in the area of social functioning of students. By learning about the need areas identified by their colleagues, practicing professionals can also become more aware of topics that they might like to investigate further through conference presentations, workshops, consultation, or independent reading.

Conducting interviews with practicing teachers allows for the identification of topics that professionals in the field would like to know more about. Self-report data is limited by the attitudes, knowledge, and perceptions of the respondents. The next step would call for conducting observational research to validate teacher self-reports and to objectively ascertain additional areas in which teachers would need to be prepared so as to enhance the social functioning of all students.

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